

Turtle, Tortoise, or Terrapin: How to Tell the Difference

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The terms turtle, tortoise, and terrapin are often used interchangeably but, depending on which country you are in, may describe a completely different type of "turtle." No matter what you decide to call them, turtles, tortoises and terrapins belong to one common order, the Chelonia. If it has a shell and is a reptile, then it is going to fall into the order Chelonia, which includes 244 different species.

While there can be a lot of differences between individual species, it can be generally said that tortoises live on land and eat a primarily vegetarian diet. Turtles, on the other hand, generally live in or near the water and eat a meat-based diet or a combination of meat and vegetation. Also turtles are often broken down into aquatic and semi-aquatic species. The aquatic species spend the majority of their lives in or near the water and eat a diet that is mostly meat based. Semi-aquatic turtles spend a greater period of time on land, but periodically enter the water. Semi-aquatic turtles tend to eat both plants and animals. An example of a semi-aquatic turtle is the well known American Box Turtle. While there are several subspecies differences, this turtle tends to spend most of its time on land, but enters very shallow water several times a week to defecate. The young turtles are primarily meat eaters, but as they get older, they eat a primarily vegetarian diet.

Did you know?

For most Americans, the term turtle describes the Chelonians that are aquatic or semi-aquatic. The term tortoise describes a Chelonian that lives primarily on land. Finally, the term terrapin can describe some freshwater or saltwater turtles, but is not often used. In Australia, all turtles are generally referred to as tortoises and in Britain, a turtle would mean a saltwater species and a terrapin would be a freshwater species.

If you interested in obtaining a Chelonian, these differences in environment and

diet are very important considerations in determining which type of animal would be best for you. In addition to these factors, there are other important issues you should consider before obtaining a turtle. Read "Turtles as Pets" to learn more.